Do You Want to be Healed?
John 5:1-9
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There was, after all, something to be said for sitting on the porch. It was not at all unpleasant, lying there in the cool shadows of the ballistrades, depending on others to give alms for food. The man had his pallet, a flexible mat, on which to rest and sleep: he had the company of the other cripples and beggars. He had the sympathy of the passers-by - who had seen him lying there for thirty-eight years. There was something to be said for staying on the porch. - the stability, the security of a well established life style.

Bethzatha - the large, double pool - approximately 150' x 120' - in Jerusalem was the scene. The pool had fine porticoes - or porches surrounding it and was very beautiful. But the uniqueness of this pool was in the curative powers attributed to its waters. The pool was fed by an intermittant, underground spring. When the spring began to flow, the surface waters rippled and splashed and turned a rusty color. Pagan superstition had suggested that a local deity was responsible for troubling the waters and that the first person in the pool following the distrubance would be healed of whatever physical problems he had. The Jews, as they did with many of the Canannite religious customs, retained the tradition while changing the symbols. An angel of the Lord disturbed the water, it was said, and the belief in the curative power of the pool was widely held.

It is interesting that archeologists have found what they believe is the Bethzatha pool - in deep excavations beneath the Church of St. Anne in Jerusalem. The pool in question has murals on its sides depicting the crippled and lame, and inscriptions attributing healing power to its waters. A careful study of church history reveals that as late as the fourth century A.D., pilgrims were making their way to the pool in Jerusalem which possessed miraculous healing powers. Scholars believe that it was the pool called Bethzatha - the one discovered beneath St. Anne's, and the one which is the scene of our text this morning.

In any case, pathetically crippled people, critically ill people took up a kind of permanent residence on the porches around the pool. Day after day they sat watching the water, waiting for the disturbance. And when it happened they frantically hobbled, limped or crawled to the edge - hoping to be the first one in. Some had friends or relatives to carry them when the magic moment occorred. Some were more mobile than others and could run to the water. Some had no chance at all - alone - severly crippled - always pushed aside at the last second - never quite able to make it. So - one man had been there, trying for 38 long years. And the longevity of his residence means that of all the sick and lame - he would have been among the most hopeless. We can deduce, I believe, that if he hadn't made it in thirty-eight years, he wasn't ever going to make it. We're almost tempted to admire his tenacity, his "never-give-up" spirit. But that exercise in sentimentality is rudely terminated by what come across as a disrepectful, cruel question from a passing stranger.

"Do you want to be healed?" Jesus of Nazareth, in Jerusalem for a religious celebration, passed by the pool, and taking note of this man among all the lame - this one who had settled in permanently - came to him. We would expect a kind word; perhaps a physical assist in getting to the water. Instead, he asked, "Do you want to be healed?" And the sense of the question, I beleive, is "Do you <u>really</u> want to be healed?"

Now that's an odd thing to ask a man who had been sitting beside that pool for nearly four decades. It's not the kind of thing ministers ask patients in pastoral calls in the hospital. Of course he wanted to be healed! Anyone could see that! Or did he? perhaps it wasn't a cruel question at all.

I sense, as I have already intimated, that this man had actually given up. I sense that somewhere in the course of those thirty-eight years he had made a bargain with fate: that, in fact, he had settled for the comfort of the porch. I sense, here, a man involved in play acting - sustaining the myth that he wanted to be healed by acting out a frantic scramble to the water. But it was

only a ritual for him now, played for the gallery, and perhaps his own conscience. He did not really want to be healed.

I see in my life, and the lives of a lot of people I have known, that very pattern. It's not really laziness. You can't call it real, intentional dishonesty. It's just a kind of agreement of convenience with fate; a stoic acceptance of the status quo - whatever that may be for us.

In small ways, every day, we do less than we could do. The minor transactions of daily living reveal an inclination to stay on the porch. Life can be an exciting adventure, full of things to do and places to see, but a lot of us settle for far less and then complain of boredom. And to us - at that point - is addressed a very profound question. "Do you really want to do those things and see those places." I knew a highly paid research chemist once who wanted nothing so much as to be a teacher. I had the pleasure of knowing him while he made the decision to quit his job and become a teacher, at a tremendous loss of income. I observed the sheer incredulity in his friends and neighbors that bordered on scorn. He <u>really</u> wanted to be a teacher: it was not ritual. But I haven't known many like him.

That's insignificant - we make our small compromises every day. On a deeper level, however, there is no one here, I would venture to say, who did not once have a plan for becoming more than he is. Perhaps an old, old plan; perhaps a lingering possibility that keeps showing its face at crucial junctures in our lives. Perhaps it's something as simple as being a better parent, or husband or wife. Perhaps it's in the area of performing some great and lasting service to mankind. Perhaps its just a hope that some day I will use all the unused personal resources that God has put at my disposal.

But the status quo is so very comfortable. And our plan probably involves a change in life-style, or a sacrifice of money, or a real, sustained effort to be something other than we are. And so we continue the ritual - talking about it is enough to salve our own consciences without really costing us anything.

"Do you really want to be healed?" I think there is no more important question than that.

Ministers are just as vulnerable as anyone else here. In a new book, Minister on the Spot, James Dittes speculates that thirty-eight years is about the average length of a clergyman's work. He asks some very pointed questions: "How many of these years are spent on the verge? How many of these years are spent watching and waiting ...? We are not in the pool yet, but we are on the verge.....Next time may be it....If the 'real thing' can't happen here, it will happen just around the corner.. If I'm not really active and engaged in it - well, I almost am." [Pres. Outlook 8/10/70 vol. 152 #29]

That's a clergyman speaking - but I sense that it's the kind of stuff a lot of lives consist of - the "almost" - the "on-the-verge" the "maybe next time". And Jesus said - "Rise, take up your pallet and walk."

I find here a pointed question to all who would profess faith in Jesus Christ. The crippled man, you will recall, didn't really want to be healed, but instead had settled for acting out a certain ritual. He had given up hope that things would be different; that some day he would be whole. And the ritual of scrambling toward the pool every time the water was troubled actually insulated him from confronting the real truth about ihimself and his intentions.

I wonder if that, too, is not our story as we relate to our faith. We make some rather incredible affirmations in this place every week. In the course of a worship service we affirm that "in Jesus Christ we are forgiven"; we say that we believe that we are saved by the Good News of the Gospel. This morning we have, as a congregation - promised to declare the word of God to, to love and pray for five specific people. But that was ritual - just a ceremony. Our belief in Jesus Christ indicates that we believe he can actually change us - actually take our lives and recreate us. But, I wonder at times, if our verbal affirmations, our ritualized declarations are anything more than that crippled man's half-hearted stumbling toward the pool.

The great philosopher Pascal once said: "Men often mistake their imagination for their heart; and they believe they are converted as soon as they think of being converted."

The astounding claim of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ is not just a hallowed memory - but a living force in the lives of his disciples: that he makes men into something more than they are: that he gives power and creative strength to those who put their lives at his disposal. But I take it that a lot of people don't really believe that or want it, and that the pious rituals of the church become a convenient substitute for the real thing.

Jesus Christ said a very simple thing to the crippled man. "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk." I wonder if the trouble with our faith is not here directly addressed. I wonder if he is not saying to us - "get up and get going - be what you say you are."

What does it require? A willingness to risk: a willingness to embrace the possibility that I may stumble and fall and not quite make it: a willingness to get up and walk ~~when the Lord commands it,~~ even when common sense tells us to remain seated.

The late Vince Lombardi, professional football coach who died last ~~week~~ year, was a great man. His greatness is in the testimony of the men who played for him, and who - to a man - testify that he made them do things they didn't think they could do: he made them become more than they thought they were. He made them better men than they ever considered possible.

I am not comparing Vince Lombardi with Jesus Christ; but I am saying that there is a sense in which what he did with professional athletes - is precisely what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. It's about standing up and walking, and becoming more than we are, and doing more than we consider possible. It's all about accepting the vulnerability - the risks - for the sake of becoming everything God created us to become.

And at the heart of it all is a smiple confrontation between those who are crippled - those who have settled for the status quo - and the one who says"Do you want to be healed?"

Amen.

We have our porches, our Father; our sanctuaries from the demands you place upon us. Disturb us by the power of your Spirit: so that we may rise up and walk. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.